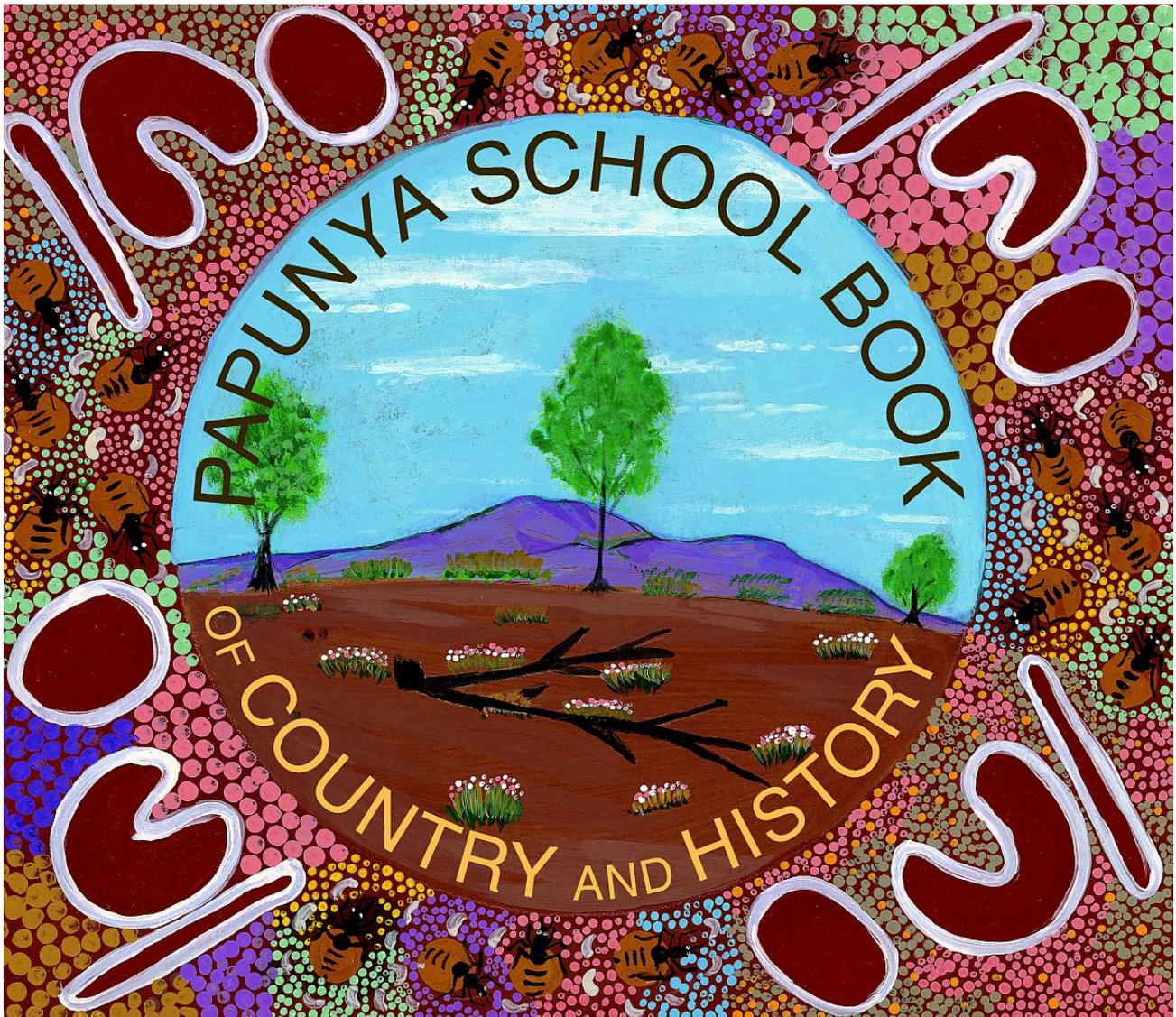


Aboriginal Children's Literature
by Anita Heiss



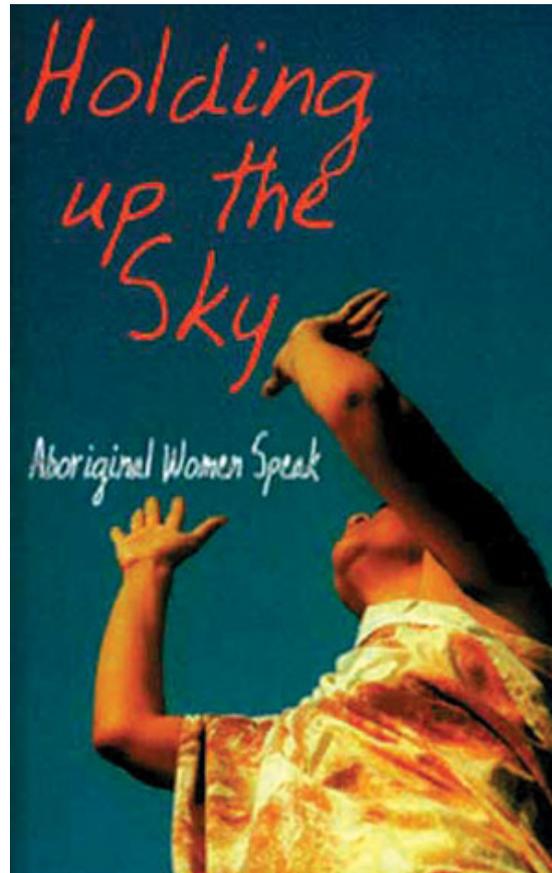
"More than just pretty pictures"

www.austlit.edu.au/blackwords

Written for *The BlackWords Essays*.

(Click the link to return to the *Essays Table of Contents*)

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Author's Note - 2019

Since this essay was published in 2015, publishing houses such as [Magabala Books](#) have continued to publish culturally rich, socially relevant and visually beautiful children's books authored and illustrated by BlackWords creators. Some of these titles include: *Dingo's Tree* (Gladys Milroy & Jill Milroy), *Alfred's War* (Rachel Bin Salleh & Samantha Fry) and *On the Way to Nana's* (Frances Haji-Ali, Lindsay Haji-Ali & David Hardy).

There have also been a number of bilingual works published as a means of reclaiming and maintaining Indigenous languages around the country.

Introduction

This paper examines the main themes considered in contemporary Aboriginal authored children's literature. It traverses a range of genres including picture books and song lyrics dealing with issues around country, identity, stolen generations and poetry. Some of these texts are referred to in other papers in this collection.

There is far more to Aboriginal authored children's books than telling the expected Dreaming or creation stories through text and brightly coloured artwork. Rather, for the past decade, books in this genre have raised the bar in terms of the greater worth of children's literature and literature for young readers in Australia, with Aboriginal titles being increasingly defined by their social, cultural, historical and political value.

Many titles coming out of Indigenous-specific publishing houses, like [Magabala Books](#) in Broome and [IAD Press](#) in Alice Springs, serve to define and demonstrate the roles and responsibilities of Aboriginal children's literature, and the specific inspiration of their individual authors. These books explore aspects of Australian history and society not regularly covered in other areas of Australian children's book publishing or in the education system. Complex issues about Aboriginal identity written by young Aboriginal authors, books that provide young readers with moral lessons, and stories that not only entertain and engage young readers but also carry the cultural role of documenting language, are increasingly highlighting the difference between Aboriginal and mainstream children's books, many of which may entertain without having any commitment to providing role model characters or storylines with a greater social purpose.

This essay explores how some recent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authored titles have used local languages and personal histories - including complex stories which deal with the Stolen Generations - to engage and educate young Australian readers, while providing much needed inspiration to nurture Indigenous audiences.

The traditional story time in kindergarten and primary schools remains an important part of the Australian education curriculum and also of children's experience of visiting local libraries. A strategic way to introduce all young Australians to aspects of Aboriginal society that they may not encounter anywhere else is to engage a captive school audience with a well-written and enthusiastically read page-turning story, inclusive of colourful illustrations. It is important to note that these books do, however, have a broad-ranging audience. Readers interested in Aboriginal stories, cultures, languages and voices are not confined to a particular age group, gender, class or geographical location.

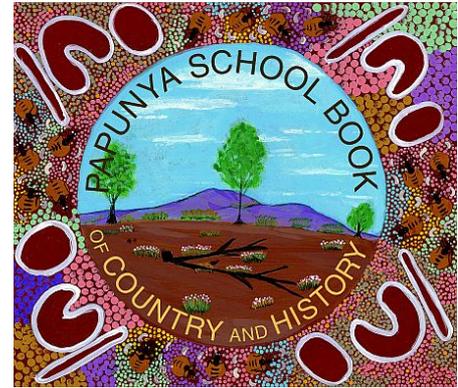
Writing History for Young People

Indigenous control of writing projects is important. Collaborations between communities and those who have particular industry skills (such as writing and painting for publication) can also be essential in ensuring Aboriginal stories are prepared for maximum audience exposure. The Australia Council guide, *Writing Cultures: Protocols for Producing Indigenous Australian Literature* (2002 and reprinted in 2007), lists "communication, consultation and consent" as integral to producing the best Aboriginal literature possible. Importantly, even with such collaborations, copyright should rest with the Aboriginal parties—individuals or organisations.

One book that is an excellent example of the relationship between communication, consultation, consent—and a book that appeals to a wide audience—is the beautifully designed and presented *Papunya School Book of Country and History* (Allen & Unwin, 2001). It is a text that has increased its readerships' understanding and appreciation of the cultural value of Aboriginal authored children's books.

Papunya School Book of Country and History was created by Anangu staff and students at the school in the Northern Territory, in collaboration with children's author [Nadia Wheatley](#) and illustrator [Ken Searle](#). The book was developed as part of the school's curriculum resources, and went on to be Joint Winner of the 2002 Award for Excellence in Educational Publishing. The judges commented:

The clarity and structure of the writing in Papunya provides, to readers of all ages, access to a very complex and complicated part of Australia's history. Developed as a collaborative project between staff, students and the authors, Papunya has crosscurriculum applicability. Its holistic and innovative approach to learning helps teachers and students to achieve a range of outcomes through study of the lives of the first Australians. (qtd in Heiss 108)



The development of the book involved, at times, as many as a dozen people producing one picture, while the text was checked and re-checked by staff, and an early version of the book was trialed in the classrooms. The process of consultation between the community and those enlisted to assist the production process (Searle and Wheatley), demonstrates the culturally appropriate way in which this publication was developed, a method that has ensured an accurate, informative and valuable book went to the printer. Importantly, and in keeping with the *Writing Cultures* protocols, copyright rests with the school.

The *Papunya School Book of Country and History* is not just for kids though. The book crosses many genres, including non-fiction and biography, and is an attractive coffee table art book. It is possibly also a “bible” of sorts for the community that lies 200 kilometres west of Alice Springs, where the Anangu (the Aboriginal people of the central desert region) are the traditional owners of the land, and where English and Luritja are spoken at school, with the languages of many countries spoken at home.

It is a book of social importance because it contributes to improved understanding between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians. The work also functions as a history book and won the 2002 NSW Premier's Young People's History Prize. The judges commented upon the book's historical significance:

The Papunya Book of Country and History is a remarkable and long overdue departure from the traditional model of history writing for young people. It offers not one voice but many, not one story but several; it builds a living bridge between ages and across cultures. This is a book that recognises the importance of both the visual and the written narrative in capturing young people's interest in their past; its stories and images are vivid and captivating, enriching and challenging. It offers non Indigenous Australians (of all ages) a chance to learn from Aboriginal culture and empowers Anangu people through the recovery of both shared and divergent stories. Indeed, Papunya is a salutary example of 'shared authority' in the writing of history and demonstrates the educational imperatives of the reconciliation process. This book is a powerful statement about our country's past and a signpost to a better

future. (qtd in Heiss 108).

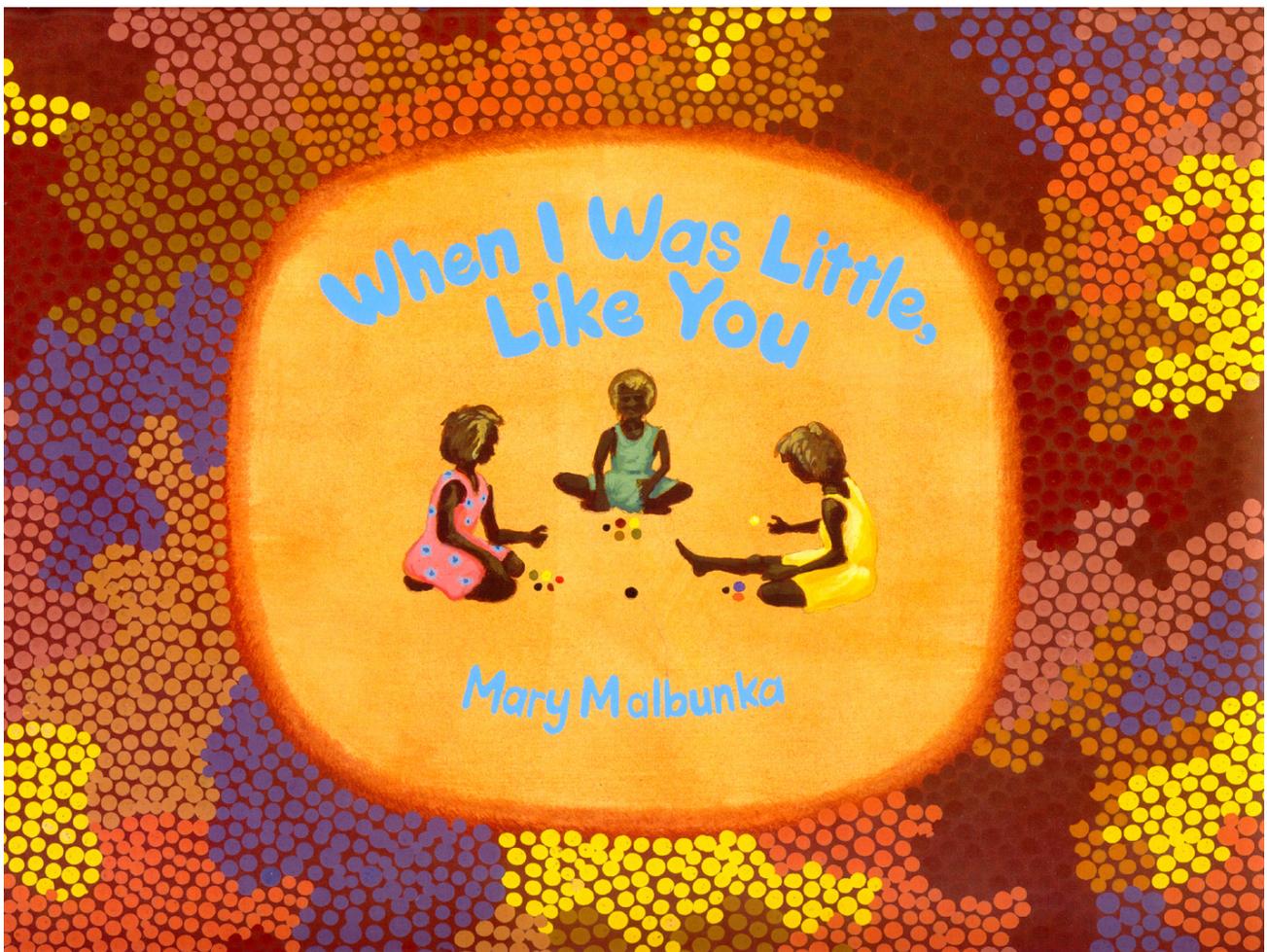
In light of these comments it is easy to see that the audience for this book is not simply the children of the school, but the community as a whole, and a broader Australian readership who now have an accessible way to learn about a particularly rich region of Australia.

The Papunya School Book also won the 2002 Award for Excellence in Educational Publishing and the 2002 Children's Book Council of Australia Eve Pownall Award. It has been incredibly successful with readers and teachers. The title is carried in hundreds of libraries nationally (local, school and university), with teachers notes developed for use in the classroom with students of "all ages".

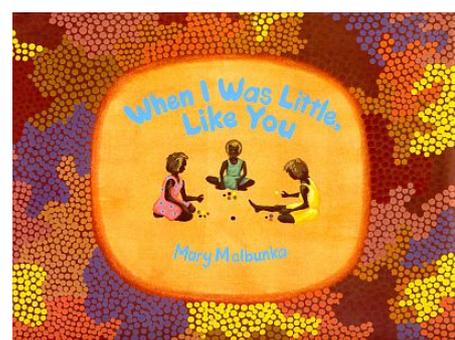
The Papunya School Book of Country and History also discusses the renowned artwork of the region, inclusive of the people, the country, the history, and the [Tjukurrpa yard] (Dreaming stories) from the 1850s to the present. It is interesting to consider the book multimodally in relation to the visual delights of the "Papunya Tula: Genesis and Genius" exhibition at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 2000, which attracted tens of thousands of Australians and international tourists. The exhibition, curated by Hetti Perkins, was the first of its kind to trace the phenomenon of the Papunya Tula art movement from the early 1970s to the present, and was part of the Gallery's contribution to the Sydney 2000 Olympic Arts Festival. But how many of those gallery visitors, before they went and after, would have understood the history behind the peoples who produced those amazing works? In her review of the exhibition Susan Allan applauded it as "a valuable overview of some of the most important work by Aboriginal artists from Australia's Western Desert". However, she also commented that the exhibition and accompanying catalogue of essays, which discuss the Papunya Tula art movement from the early 1970s to the present, "made no attempt to explore the complex aesthetic and political questions posed by the emergence of Papunya Tula and the rapid growth of contemporary Aboriginal art".

This multi-genre book is a compilation of drawings, paintings (including dot), time-line and information boxes, and provides a comprehensive understanding of the history of Papunya since the first tjulkura (white people) appeared in their ngurra (Country) and the local people feared them as mamu (ghosts or devils). The reader travels visually through the history of stolen land, killing stock, Anangu resistance and the arrival of white explorers, right through to the arrival of missionaries brandishing the gospel and "devils in the sky" (airplanes), the first school in Papunya in 1960, and on to the 1992 High Court decision on Native Title, which led to the handing back of a sacred site of Pulka Karrinyarra (what whitefellas call Mt Wedge) in July 1999. These are all significant moments in the history of Papunya, and it is the simplicity of the book that makes such complex issues and events so accessible to all ages and literacy levels.

In the section, "A New Way to Paint Country", we learn in one paragraph about how Arrente man Albert Namatjira began painting landscapes, while Mary Malbunka's painted map gives an aerial view of how Haasts Bluff looked when she was a five year old child, and offers a straightforward understanding of where the school lay in relation to the "ration place", "the whitefella's house", the church, water tank, and the road to Alice Springs. The time-lines offer simple yet significant notes on what happened and when in the region and nationally. Reading about the history of Australia has never been so interesting and enjoyable, although school children often claim learning history is boring. Appropriate resources are the key to teaching history in an engaging way and the template designed by Papunya School could easily be adapted by communities nationally, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, as a means of recording the history of a particular place and people, making it interesting and relevant to children around the country



Following that template is the late Mary N. Malbunka’s *When I Was Little, Like You* (Allen & Unwin, 2003), which shows the similarities between children growing up, regardless of geography and cultural affiliations. Malbunka’s strategy is one of unifying children of different backgrounds, countering the fear of difference that is often instilled by mainstream media. The author uses language (her own Luritja and English) as well as contemporary illustrations and traditional dot paintings to tell the story of her life as a pipirri (child) growing up in both her mother and father’s ngurra (country)—Warlpiri and Pintupi.



The inclusive nature of Malbunka’s title, *When I Was Little, Like You*, (Allen and Unwin, 2003) is obvious when one reads of her childhood. There are some things that all young people do regardless of culture, social status or geography—such as playing games, swimming (whether beach, river or creek), building and playing in cubby houses, ditching school, knocking off fruit from the neighbour’s tree and garden and so on. These are things I also did as a young child growing up in the eastern suburbs of Sydney. Of course, there were things that Malbunka did as a child that I didn’t do, although I wished I

had—like sitting around the campfire and learning from the old people about place names and stories relevant to near-by lands. While I didn't learn that way, Malbunka's book shows me how she did, and how she later passed along that same information to young people in her country, including information about where some animals are found. For example the tjilkamata (echidna) and kanyala (wallaby) prefer puli (rocky country), while the malu (kangaroo) and kalaya (emu) can be found in tjata (scrub country). We also learn that it's best to hunt for malu in the dry season because that's when they are the fattest.

The success in putting this book together means that, although it is classified in the genre of children's and youth's literature, it will engage readers of all ages page after page. The language notes and diagrams at the end of the book equip the reader in understanding how to read Malbunka's illustrations, making the most of this culturally and socially rich book.

Like *The Papunya School Book*, Mary Malbunka's work is also a history book for all Australians. It was shortlisted for the 2003 NSW Premier's History Award for Young People because the judges believed it was a book that would nurture intercultural understanding in all the children who read it:

This clearly told story would appeal to both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children, with its narratives of Mary's life, growing up in the 1960s. Historical elements include experiences at a government settlement, glimpses of traditional living, 'Sorry Business' and difficulties of dealing with the demands of two languages - English and Luritja. Both languages feature in the story telling with an English/Luritja glossary provided. An appealing book, it is an interesting recording and passing on of experiences closely resembling traditional oral accounts. It plays an important role in furthering cross-cultural understandings and empathy amongst Australian children. (qtd in Heiss 108)

Jackie Huggins AM, Co-Chair for [Reconciliation Australia](#), writes (in an endorsement on the book's inside cover) that "*this beautiful work is a gift to children, education and reconciliation*".

One young reader highlights the value of *When I Was Little, Like You* in educating young readers about Aboriginal Australia, and the consequences of invasion and colonization. Eleven-year-old Alice from Adelaide explained why she liked the book so much and what it taught her:

I really thought that the illustrations in the book were excellent and I like the style in which they were drawn. The colours that were used were really good and made me feel like I was in the outback. I also liked the dot paintings that were in the book. I liked the way the book taught me about traditional Aboriginal culture and lifestyle – like the hunting, tracking, exploring and playing that went on. I liked the way they learned things from the stories their families told them. I think it also gives you an idea of how the Aboriginal people's lifestyle has been affected by the white man's world.

The basic foundation for any form of reconciliation to work in Australia is respect and understanding; non-Indigenous Australia needs to understand fully its own history, that is, the shared history of this country post-1788, and the impact that white Australia has had on black Australia since first contact. With that understanding comes empathy and respect coupled with a desire to learn more about the cultures and societies of the First Peoples of Australia. Such learning begins with books like Mary Malbunka's laying the foundation for understanding with young people in the classroom and the local library. It begins by placing them in Malbunka's shoes, in her country when she was a child growing up, and then relating that experience in some way to their own life experiences today.

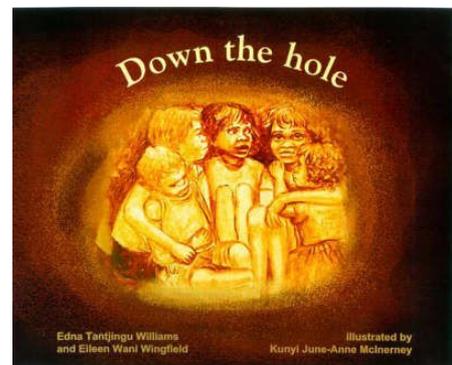
Telling the Stories of the Stolen Generations to Children

Important elements of history considered in Aboriginal picture books include the Stolen Generations and the forced removal of Aboriginal children as part of the government’s policies of protection and assimilation. While many adult Australians are now more aware of the history behind the policy and its continuing repercussions, many of them have not read the important 689-page volume *Bringing Them Home* (AHRC, 1997 date), which is the report from the National Inquiry into the removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families. While Australians may be interested in this aspect of their shared history, they still want inescapably disturbing material to be presented to them in a palatable, not too confrontational or challenging narrative, and for it be written in an easily accessible style. For children, resources about such serious issues need to be in formats that will not traumatise them, like the young Aboriginal people themselves who were removed in the past. But how does one tell such a terrible story to young children, both black and white?

One example is *Down the Hole, Up the Tree, Across the Sandhills : Running From the State and Daisy Bates* (IAD Press, 2000), by Edna Tantjingu Williams and Eileen Wani Wingfield, a true story of the “The State People” stealing children, “just kidnapping them” as part of the policy of “Protection” in South Australia (2). *Down the Hole* is a children’s book that takes very complex aspects of history and politics and translates them into terms simple enough for children and adults to understand, and to try to relate to and engage with.

The story tells of Edna, originally from Tarcoola, and Eileen of Ingomar Station, and their childhood experiences of avoiding the dreaded “State People” who visited Coober Pedy where the girls grew up. We read of children hiding in bushes and the extraordinary lengths to which parents went to ensure their children weren’t taken, such as putting them down holes in the ground and then sending food down by rope:

My old people used to chuck us down pitingka – chuck us down the holes ... We used to sit down real quiet too ... And the poor Old People used to look around everywhere before they can send a feed down, you know. (12-14)



The memory recall in this story is not laden with terror or even bitterness, which makes it likely that young readers will not be frightened by the story, but instead concerned about why young Aboriginal children had a life so different to their own today. Such desperate measures by parents, behaviour that today would never be necessary or acceptable in a civilised society, will have young readers asking, “Why did the kids have to hide? Why did the Government want to take the Aboriginal kids away?” A short essay for older readers and educators, titled “Why Were They Hiding?” is included at the back of the book to help prepare teachers and others for the anticipated questions from children.

This story will transport readers back in time in Australian history and help young Australians to understand the reality of Aboriginal life under the Protection Acts. This story will not instill fear because it is told with a sense of simple reality: that this is how it was for the families and they did what needed to be done to protect children from removal by government authorities. Rather than a tool to teach young readers about hideous aspects of Australian history, such as injustices committed against Aboriginal people, it would best be considered as a book that outlines major differences between the life experiences of most young Australians today and young Aboriginal children of the past.

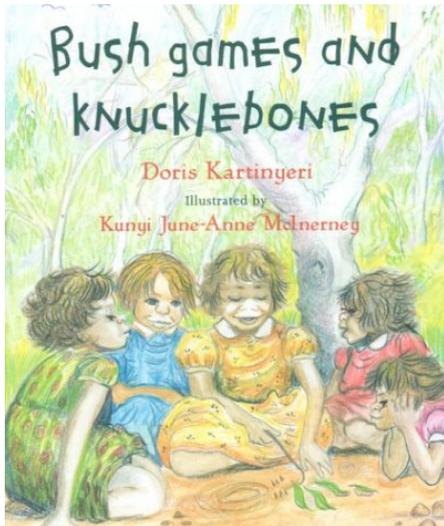
Fittingly, there is also a brief piece titled “About Daisy Bates”, which explains the negative references to Bates throughout the book:

Daisy Bates was famous for her writing and charitable work but not everyone liked her ... In her popular book, The Passing of the Aborigines, she made it clear that she thought Aboriginal people were dying out, and she was also intolerant of ‘half-caste’ or mixed descent children ... But ... she used her own money as well as donations to provide food, clothing and basic medical care for her Anangu neighbours. (48)

The book design by Louise Wellington and Brenda Thornley warrants particular mention. Text in language (also written phonetically) and English sitting side-by-side in the story, with explanations down the left-hand side of the page, assists in the reclamation of language, adding another dimension to an already culturally and socially significant product.

This work also has personal meaning for the illustrator Kunyi June-Anne McNerney, herself taken from her family at a young age, when she was known as Kunyi, and placed in the Oodnadatta children’s Mission, where she was renamed Anne. The illustrations are life-like and at times sombre but they are not depressing, thereby ensuring that young readers will not be put off or disturbed by the images. The children depicted look scared, of course, but no more scared than any child hiding from someone they know to be “bad”. Today, it would be called “stranger danger”. The colour chosen for a blanket is symbolically powerful for the particular story being told.

Finally, Williams says that writing this book is a legacy to her grandchildren and great grandchildren. For her it was a “way of setting the record straight about what really happened to Aboriginal people with the ‘people-that-come-lately’: that is, the rest of us” (42). Likewise, Eileen says she was happy to make this book for her children, grandchildren and great grandchildren. The generosity of spirit and wisdom wrapped up in the life-experiences of these two Elders, and shared within the pages of this book, highlights the value Aboriginal people are placing in recording our own stories in the printed form for all Australians (and indeed international readers) to learn and grow from, either in an educational setting, or simply reading alone at home or in the library.

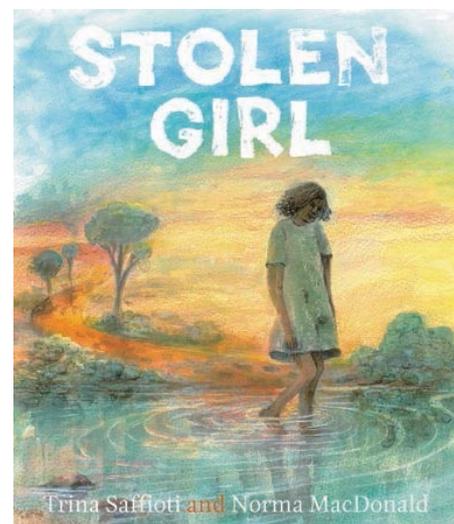


Down the Hole is a book for all children, and the many, many Australian adults who still need to grasp what happened in history to stolen Aboriginal children in this country. In contrast, Doris Kartinyeri's *Bush Games and Knucklebones* (Magabala, 2003) tells a different story to most books (in any genre) on the Stolen Generations. It looks at happy young children playing games in the Colebrook Children's Home at Oodnadatta in South Australia. Doris Kartinyeri spent fourteen years at Colebrook after being taken from her family soon after birth and, for her, the book is a tribute to how the children at the home bonded to become a family for each other. The book is primarily about how they entertained themselves as children, playing games like "knucklebones"; something often called "jacks" by young people in the 1970s. The rules for knucklebones, and "kick the tin", are also provided at the end of the book, so children today can enjoy the innocent and inexpensive games of the past, which are so different from today's expensive and often violent video games.

This book shares the stories of "secret gardens" and "created playgrounds" where all the children "were interested in was the fun of building a pretend bus or truck" (24). The final lines of the book, "We played these games daily – they made us happy and we shared with the other kids. Do you play imaginary games?" (27), emphasises the shared experience of children being children, with imagination and no boundaries to friendship, and what is possible with shared creativity. Accompanying the text are signature illustrations by Kunyi June-Anne McInerney (who illustrated *Down the Hole*). The visual representation of the story in *Bush Games and Knucklebones* reinforces the truth of sentiment behind Kartinyeri's words; the colours are alive and vibrant, in stark contrast to the colours used for the very different story in *Down the Hole*.

More recently released was *Stolen Girl* (Magabala, 2011), written by Trina Saffioti (descended from the Gugu Yulangi people of Far Northern Queensland) and illustrated by Norma MacDonald (descended from the Yamatji people of the Gascoyne region and the Nyungar people of south west Western Australia). Using inspiring mixed-media illustrations, the book is another commendable effort in ensuring that Australian children engage with the history of this country.

Saffioti had a maternal grandmother taken from her family when she was very young, and *Stolen Girl* is a fictional story that imagines what might have happened to her grandmother. The story revolves around a nameless fictional character who carefully and cautiously points out, through text and images, the differences between life in the home she



was removed to (a lonely, regimented dormitory life) and the family life she misses and dreams about (with storytelling around the campfire, mornings with her mother on their verandah, and fishing and swimming in the river).

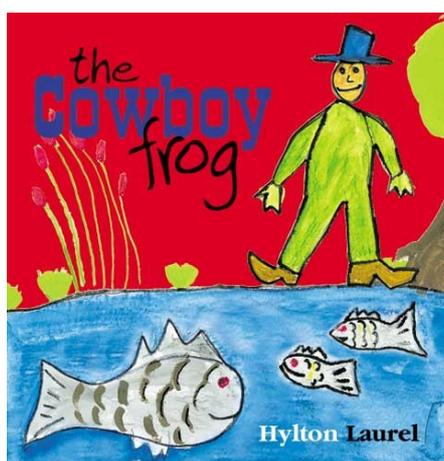
Works like these are essential for use in the classroom, so that Australian adults and children can understand their sense of privilege – past and present – by learning about the lives of earlier generations of Aboriginal children removed from their families.

Language Reclamation and Maintenance

Language reclamation and maintenance are priorities for Aboriginal Australia because, of the 250 different Indigenous languages (most with several dialects) estimated at the time of First Contact, less than one tenth are still strong languages of everyday communication for Australia’s First Peoples, and fragmented collections of words are all that remain of many once full and complex languages:

According to the NILS report, among the original 250 or so languages, only about 145 Indigenous languages are still spoken to some degree. Many languages are not fully spoken by anybody, and only some words and phrases are remembered. Less than 20 languages are considered to be strong in the sense that they are still spoken by all generations. (Obata and Lee)

Titles like *Down the Hole*, discussed above, which offer some level of bi-lingualism, using in this case words and phrases in Alywarr accompanied by English translation, are more culturally valuable than many mono-lingual titles. Aboriginal words and phrases in children’s books such as *Down the Hole* allow children from the language group to practice their own languages, while other children—Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal alike—can also learn some of the rich Yankunytjatjara, Kokatha and Matutjara languages. It is also a reminder to both educators and students that there were, and remain, distinctly different Aboriginal languages in Australia.



There is a further unique feature of Aboriginal authored children’s books that weave language throughout that needs mention and that is the books written by very young Aboriginal kids. *The Cowboy Frog* (Magabala, 2003), written and illustrated by nine-year old Hylton Laurel, is targeted at three-to-six year-olds. It is a story about a brave, blue hatwearing, green frog near Noonkanbah Crossing who loved to fish for barramundi and was known as “the Cowboy Frog”. The story teaches kids that animals should only be hunted and killed for the purpose of eating and surviving, not for fun or sport. The illustrations are authentic, obviously drawn by a young person. But its richness is in

its bi-lingual text combining English and the Walmajarri language (translations provided by [Yangkana Laurel](#)).

The Cowboy Frog is part of Magabala's *Uupababa* series, a collection of titles filled with bright illustrations for, and sometimes by, young children. The word uupababa is an Aboriginal word and is used extensively in the Broome area (where Magabala is located). It loosely translates as meaning 'little child' or 'baby'. *The Cowboy Frog* won an achievement award in the Multicultural Book Competition in 2004 and has set young Hylton up as a storyteller with promise.

Community-based publishing initiatives like [Black Ink Press](#) in Townsville have also provided forums and publishing outlets for young aspiring writers to pen stories related to their own lives while incorporating traditional language. *Catching Fish*, written and illustrated by sixteen-year-old [Venita Korkaktain](#), is told in Wik Mungkan and English. It's a bright, brief tale about catching fish that allows kids (and those reading to and with them) to learn some Wik Mungkan language as well.

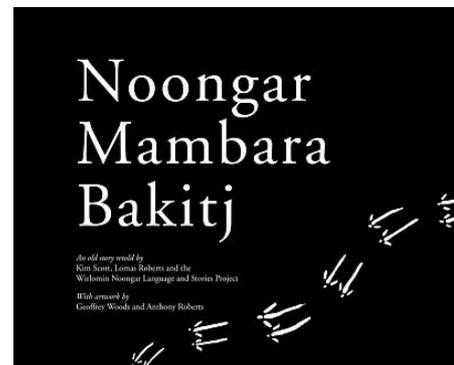


In Western Australia, twice Miles Franklin Award winning Noongar novelist [Kim Scott](#) — *Benang : From the Heart* (Fremantle Press, 1999) and *That Deadman Dance* (Picador, 2010) — has also done some significant work with the Wirlomin Noongar Language and Stories Project (WNLSP). The resultant two publications, *Mamang* and *Noongar Mambara Bakitj* (both UWAP, 2011), have been completed after much community collaboration. With a responsibility to a

Noongar audience in mind, both stories were first told to, and recorded by linguist Gerhardt Laves at Albany, Western Australia, around 1931.

The story of *Mamang* as told by Freddie Winmar to Laves, and Noongar *Mambara Bakitj* first shared by Rob Roberts with the linguist, were both workshopped in a series of community meetings, which included members of the Roberts, Winmar and Laves families. *Mamang*, which means whale, is the story of a Noongar fella who goes for a journey inside the belly of a whale, squeezing the whale's heart and singing all the while, until he arrives at a beautiful sandy beach with a welcoming community. The story, re-told in English and Noongar by Scott, [Iris Woods](#) and the WNLSP, is vividly illustrated with artwork by [Jeffrey Farmer](#), [Helen Nelly](#), and [Roma Winmar Yibiyung](#)).

Noongar Mambara Bakitj is a story retold by Scott, [Robert Lomas](#), and the WNLSP. It centres on a hunter and his ability to read the land to find kangaroo for sustenance, but in killing and generously sharing his catch, he makes the mamabara (spirit creature) very angry and a boomerang battle follows. A story that should be read out loud for most impact, it's the accompanying illustrations by [Geoffrey Woods](#) and [Anthony Roberts](#) with their vibrant sky and rusty coloured earth, and figures that dance on the page, that adds to the richness of the reading experience.



In writing about the process of creating these books Scott said:

Our intention was to celebrate the stories, as well as to create a sense of community ownership ... we wanted to use these stories to bind a community together rather than – as sometimes happens in oppressed communities – promote rivalry over our collective heritage and exacerbate other community tensions and tear us apart. We hoped the people who received the stories would share them with their family and friends. (39)

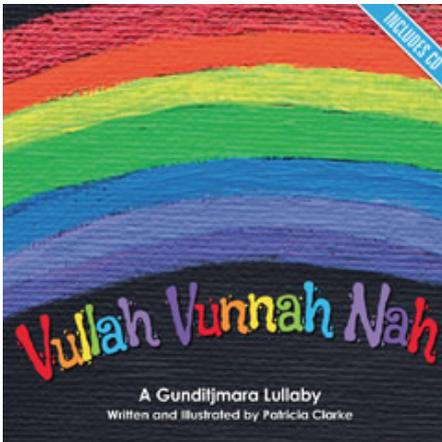
It is the purpose expressed by Scott that sets the development of Aboriginal children's books like *Mamang* and *Noongar Mambara Bakitj* apart from general kids' books written purely for entertainment value.

Through these titles non-Noongar readers have been blessed with an insight into just two stories of the Noongar people and a sampling of their language. Both titles include a glossary and a note on vocabulary, pronunciation and spelling. So while the work in itself is an act of reclamation and maintenance of language, it can also be utilized as a learning tool for those wanting to build some foundation of the language. Scott notes in his comments on behalf of the WNLSP that the group, in considering whether to use Standard English or Aboriginal English, were aware:

'...that Noongar readers would make their own versions anyway, and so we decided on a relatively standard English, flavoured by the spoken voice.' (41)

Unfortunately, many of the Elders who were involved in the recording of these stories have since passed on, and while these works remain beautiful and significant legacies of them, it is a harsh reminder of the urgent need to record and publish as

many of our Old People's stories as possible while they are still alive. Of value too is a downloadable reading of *Mamang* from the Internet, and a CD is also available.



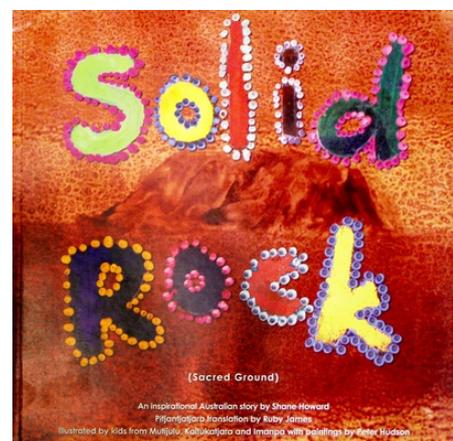
Because there are few Aboriginal lullabies in print, *Vullah Vunnah Nah: A Gunditjmara Lullaby* (One Day Hill, 2012), available as a book and a CD, is something to celebrate. The author, illustrator and performer of the traditional Gunditjmara song, Patricia Clarke, has long been at the forefront of a cultural renaissance in the southwest of Victoria by working across art forms. She is the daughter of the late Uncle Banjo Clarke (on whom the book *Wisdom Man* (2003) is based) and the late Audrey Couzins. The CD enclosed with the book includes the lullaby sung by Patricia Clarke with well-known singer-songwriter Archie Roach and Stephanie Young, Shane Howard, Lee Morgan, and Marcia Howard.

From the same Melbourne-based publisher comes the anthem of *Solid Rock Puli Kunpunka* (Sacred Ground) (2010) by Shane Howard and the Goanna band, with a Pitjantjatjara translation by Ruby James and Trevor Adamson, and illustrated by kids from Mutitjulu, Kaltukatjara and Imanpa, with paintings by Peter Hudson.

Songs like 'Solid Rock' have been considered by some (including myself) to make a more apt anthem than our current one, because its lyrics reflect and respect this country's First Nations Peoples and the land. Shane Howard's 'passionate, angry song about the general silence masking fundamental truths of Australian history' is so popular it has been reinvented many times. Newcastle musos the Street Warriors rocked the Sydney Opera House with Howard in 2009 as the closing act for the Deadly Awards and have recorded a version with former Australian Idol star Shannon Noll.

The original kid's picture book version of the *Solid Rock* song lyrics was published by One Day Hill in 2010, but the re-released work (2012) includes a CD: one track is Howard and Band singing in English, and the second track is Howard, Band and the school communities of Pukatja, Pipalyatjara and Murputja singing in the Pitjantjatjara language.

As a bonus to this publishing venture, 25% of profits from the sale of this title go towards youth initiatives in the communities involved with this project.



A recent initiative of Charles Darwin University is the *Living Archive of Aboriginal Languages* (<http://laal.cdu.edu.au/>).

This online archive of children's books published for educational purposes is freely available and contains approximately 400 texts* in many languages of the Northern Territory and most were written in communities, sometimes by the children. The website provides a clickable map of the NT that allows users to go directly to the book. BlackWords also links to all of the books in the archive.

Stories with Morals

It's quite common for illustrated picture books by Aboriginal authors to have some form of moral woven through the storyline, largely due to individual creators being committed to social issues and cultural maintenance. The first work of this kind was published back in 1964 when Jacaranda Press released *The Legends of Moonie Jarl*, a collection of stories told by [Wilf Reeves](#) and illustrated by [Olga Miller](#), both Badtjala people from Queensland. This is believed to be the first children's book completely created by Indigenous people, and by those to whom the stories belonged (O'Connor 67).

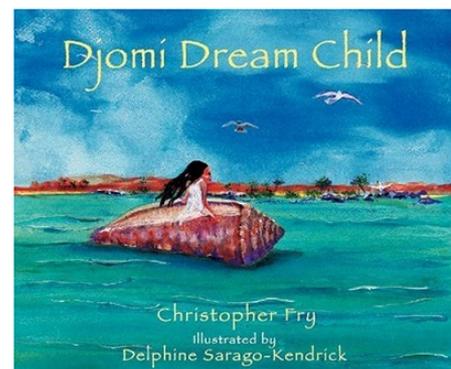
Academic [Juliet O'Connor](#) writes in her essay on the book:

The Legends of Moonie Jarl is a collection of twelve traditional stories of the Badtjala people from Fraser Island and the adjacent mainland around Hervey Bay in Queensland. The Moonie Jarl of the title refers to the Badtjala Elder responsible for passing traditional knowledge through generations of Badtjala people. The author and illustrator's father, Frederick of the Wondunna Clan, told these stories to Badtjala children, as lessons about specific places and protocols of behavior. Each story in this collection is incorporated into one of nine story-maps, supported by explanatory keys opposite each full-page illustration. (68)

Another example of authors whose work reflects their sense of social responsibility is Burarra man [Christopher Fry](#) from Maningrida, who devoted himself to working with young people in order to strengthen their cultural knowledge, and joined forces with illustrator [Delphine Sarago-Kendrick](#) to produce his second children's book, *Djomi Dream Child* (Magabala, 2004).

Djomi Dream Child is full of messages and morals. The reader learns lessons through the main character, a young spirit girl, the Dream Child. She leaves her old spirit friend behind when she goes in search of her natural parents in the world of the living, and we see the selflessness of true friends who show love by supporting us to pursue our dreams, even if it means travelling far away.

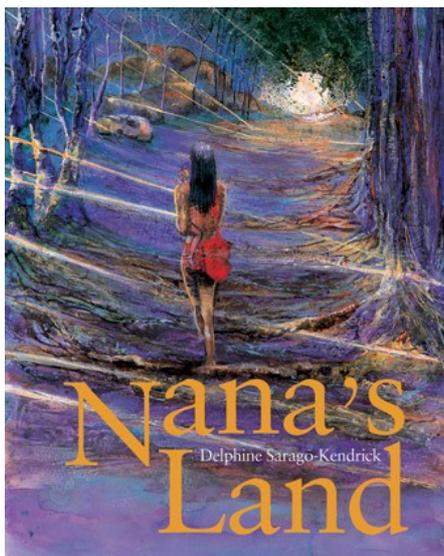
By going on the journey with the Dream Child the reader learns a little of the geography of and around Maningrida, and the legend that any woman who goes walkabout, or bathes, drinks or camps near the waters at Djomi, will have a spirit baby enter her, giving birth to a child in the natural world. Fortunately for the young Dream Child, her



spirit finds a home with a young woman without children and her dream comes true.

The rich, colourful illustrations are central to the telling of the story of the young spirit girl. They do justice to Fry's words and capture well the contemporary lives of the young Aboriginal couple and their new child in Maningrida, where Nja-Bulung (the Dream Girl's skin name once born into the natural world to Bulanj and Njamarrang) plays with a friend in what looks like a modern sports uniform.

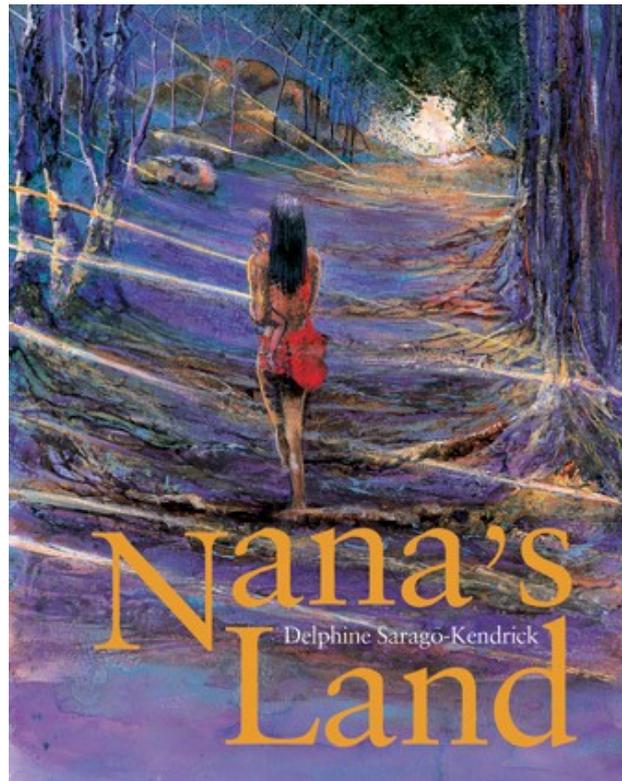
Also published in 2004 was Delphine Sarago-Kendrick's own book, *Nana's Land* (Magabala, 2004). Aimed at primary school children, this vibrantly illustrated story follows the journey of three Yindiji children, Warabul (the young hunter), his sister Kutabah and baby brother Bidu to find their Nana Garna's country in Queensland's Atherton Tablelands.



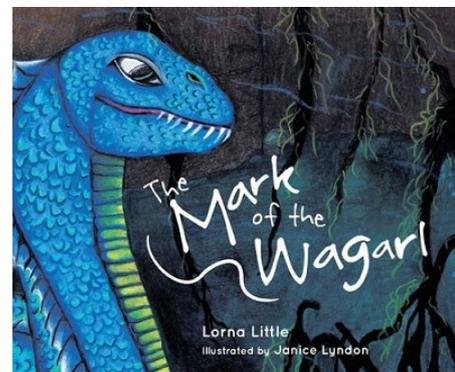
The story combines adventure with the significance and responsibilities of a young person's coming of age, and highlights the role of storytelling in Aboriginal culture to pass on specific and important information of survival and history. The survival skills of Warabul and Kutabah are indeed tested when they find themselves separated from their extended family and must make their own way to their grandmother's homeland.

The moral to this story is not only the importance of storytelling in Indigenous communities though, but also the role of story-listening! It was Warabal and Kutabah listening intently to Nana Garna's stories that ensured they found her country later on when they had no Elders around to guide them on their way. Their safe arrival in the ranges meant they passed their first test and were well on their way to adulthood.

Incorporating a Yindinji language word list, the author dedicates the book to, among others, the stranger who gave Delphine her first story book, *Emanuel*, and reminds the reader of the significance of books for young people.



Another story with a moral is the popular children's book *The Mark of the Wagarl*, first released in 2004 (and re-released in 2012), written by **Lorna Little**, Elder of the Binjareb Noongar community in Western Australia. In this title the author passes on some of her cultural knowledge about the Sacred Water Snake. The story tells of the travels and responsibilities of Wagarl, the big boss of all snakes and how he keeps the waterways clean in Noongar Country. But the story is essentially a moral tale about obedience, teaching young people to respect and listen to their Elders. We learn, through the misadventures of the young boy Baardi, what can happen when the wisdom of Elders is not heeded.



Cover of the New Ed., Magabala Books, 2012.

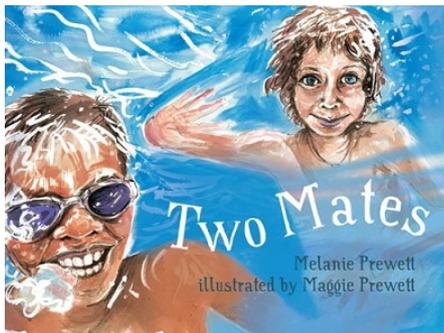
Rather than avoiding Wagarl as advised by his Elders, Baardi dives right into the waterhole and deep into the cave under the big river gum where Wagarl lives. Unfortunately, the young fella suffers life-long consequences for disobeying the Elders and disturbing the Wagarl.

Little says of writing this book:

The children are my reason for writing this story. They have impressed upon me the importance of recording the stories of our people for their cultural identity and strengthening, so that they may pass them on to their children and grandchildren. They are strong in their desire to share stories with their wadjella friends to lead towards a

better understanding of Nyoongar culture.

The Mark of the Wagarl was illustrated by Little’s niece, Perth-based visual arts student [Janice Lyndon](#), who has painted from an early age and draws inspiration from her Elders and the environment, and this book is her debut into the publishing world.



Courtesy of Magabala Books

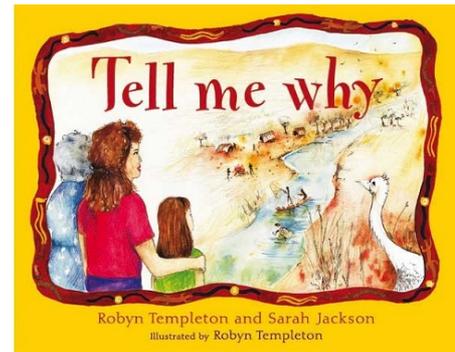
A simple moral also emerges in *Two Mates* (Magabala, 2012) a story that revolves around the double-message that friendship knows no boundaries, least of all boundaries of race or disability. *Two Mates* was written by [Melanie Prewett](#) and illustrated by [Maggie Prewett](#) (both descended from the Ngarlumu people of the Pilbara region of Western Australia). It is based on the true story of two young boys—Jack (Indigenous) and Raf (non-Indigenous) — and of how their mateship plays out in their coastal town of Broome. Together they search for hermit crabs, go hunting for barni (goanna), fish for salmon, explore the markets, eat satays and dress up as superheroes. The reader only learns at the end of the story, via an illustration, that Raf is in a wheelchair because of spina bifida. The boys’ active life together clearly demonstrates that, on a day-to-day basis, people of all backgrounds and circumstances can live together joyfully and peacefully.

Aboriginal Kids and Their Stories of Identities

In terms of children’s books attempting to discuss the many complex issues around Aboriginal identity, *Tell Me Why* (Magabala, 2004) is Sarah Jackson’s story, but it is also the story of so many other Aboriginal people dealing with society’s preconceived ideas about Aboriginality and the use of skin colour to determine identity. At seven years of age, Sarah is simply a fair-skinned Aboriginal girl who goes to school, has dolls and plays chasey, just like other girls her age. White with freckles, though, one day she realises her friends and family are different shades of colour and she starts asking questions like: “Nana, how come I am Aboriginal like you, but you have brown skin and I have white skin?” (12).

Sarah then spends time with her Nana Mac and Grandma Doris, and by asking questions and listening to her Elders she resolves the issue of marrying fair skin with Aboriginal identity. This was an issue for Sarah, one presumes, because so many non-Indigenous Australians do not understand the historical constructions of Aboriginality. Aboriginality is based not on skin colour, but on connection to country, kin, spirituality, family history and life experience.

Tell Me Why is a valuable tool for teachers to use in the classroom because it is an upbeat, positive story about Aboriginal identity in the 21st century. The questions kids like Sarah ask, the same questions often asked of Aboriginal kids in the playground, and even by adults, raise issues that we deal with on a daily basis, such as “How can you be an Aborigine if you’ve got fair skin, blonde hair, blue eyes, live in the city?” and so on. *Tell Me Why* gives an honest look at such questions through a child’s eyes and the answers provided will help young people, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, to understand how people like Sarah are Aboriginal and proud to be so.

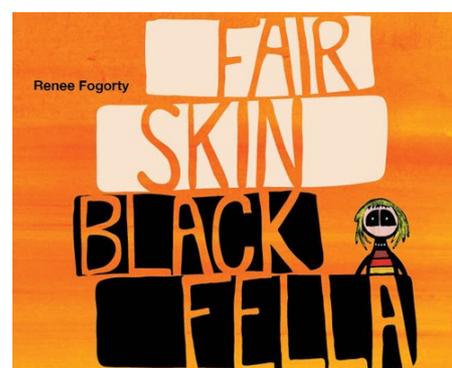


The book is also successful in that, in a gentle and accessible way, history is provided about life prior to invasion, as well as the policy of protection and its consequences for those of the stolen generations and their families – including young Sarah. *Tell Me Why*, written with the assistance of Sarah’s mother [Robyn Templeton](#) who also illustrated the text, will also encourage students to research their own backgrounds and heritage, thereby contributing to a greater social conscience in terms of celebrating diversity in the Australian community.

In *Fair Skin Black Fella* (Magabala, 2010) [Renee Fogorty](#) speaks of her own life experiences as a ‘fair skinned’ Koori in Sydney, although she is from the Wiradjuri people of the Lachlan River in New South Wales, and her young character Mary lives on a dusty red cattle station. There is a peppering of Wiradjuri language words throughout, and while the images are intriguing they don’t necessarily reflect a contemporary lifestyle – even on the land.

Regardless of location, the experience of racism – white on black, black on black, and black on white – is sadly universal. In this story young Mary is suffering from just looking different to the other Aboriginal kids, and no doubt many will relate to this very short tale. However, there is a positive, helpful ending, because just as kids can learn the nasty aspects of life from adults—kids aren’t born with racist attitudes they learn them—so too can they learn from the wisdom of their Elders that identity comes from family, community, country, culture and spirituality, and realise that skin pigment is irrelevant.

The general concept and message of *Fair Skin Black Fella* remains: Aboriginal identity is not about the colour of your skin. As Old Ned says: ‘*We all brothers and sisters in this life, no matter what colour we are.*’



Courtesy of Magabala Books

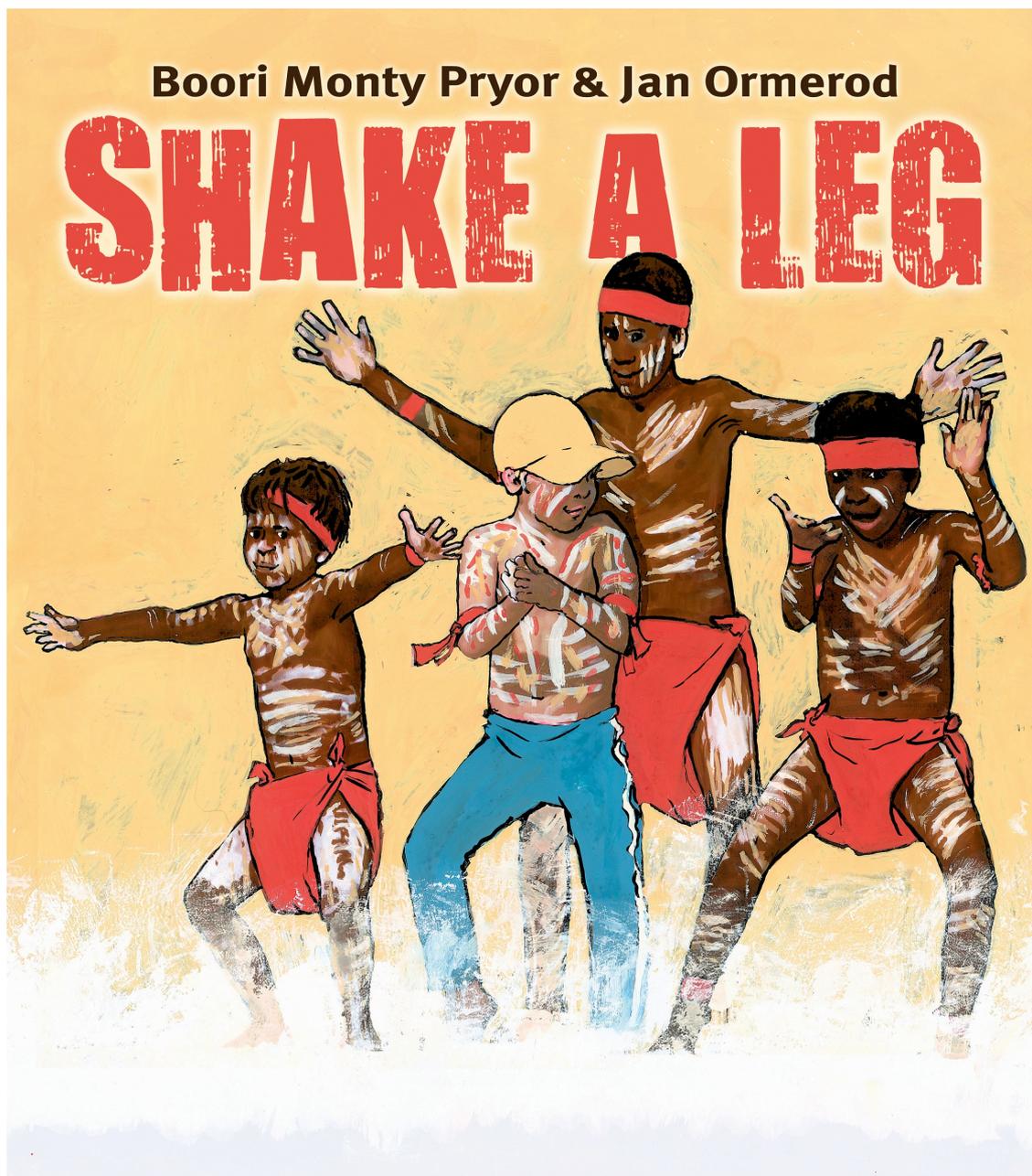
A different perspective on contemporary identity appears in [Boori Pryor’s](#) *Shake a Leg* (Allen & Unwin, 2010). Illustrated

by [Jan Ormerod](#), the work took out the 2011 Prime Minister's Literary Award for Children's Fiction. Inspired by members of his own family who hail from Northern Queensland and the Birrigubba and Kungganji nations, Pryor has woven his ancient traditions, culture and stories into a modern day yarn.

Through the story of three young fellas hunting for pizza the reader gets an insight into contemporary Aboriginal life. It's a place where Blackfellas speak Italian, where Murris are chefs, nurses and sound engineers, where crocodile pizza is washed down with milkshakes and where the busy street acts as the bora ring today. It's also where people can live in cities and still respect and value thousands of years of culture. In short, it's a story that breaks down stereotypes of what it means to be Aboriginal.

Not all books are award-winning or coming out of established publishing houses though. *Old Way New Way* was written and produced by Weetangera Primary School in Canberra, and looks at the expression of identity through traditional art and culture alongside its expression through contemporary art forms, modern day technologies, mediums and ways of doing things. For example, the kids use clapsticks the old way and play musical instruments like the sax the new way. They like rock art old way and digital art new way.

The book was designed by the students as a 'home reader' style book, as well as a celebration of the journey that the school's "Yirri Dancers" have been on.



Aboriginal Anthems Make Important Kids Books

Our cultural evolution in Australia means our young people now have access to song lyrics that enrich, engage, entertain and educate.

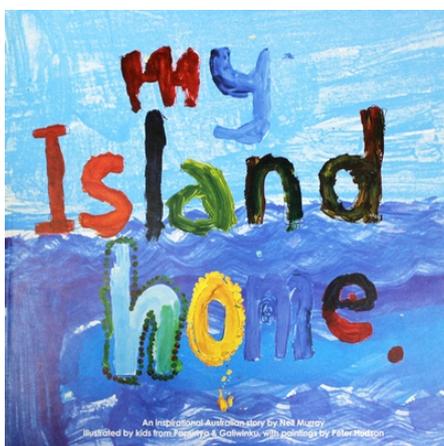
Four titles out of Melbourne-based publisher [One Day Hill](#) have brought to the page some of Australia’s most well-known Aboriginal anthems, written and performed by some of the country’s most loved Australian musicians –black and white – married with artwork from community kids and professional painters.

The first book *From Little Things Big Things Grow* is about the story of [Vincent Lingiari](#), the beginning of the land rights movement, and the strength and will of the Gurindji people to fight for what was rightfully theirs. It was originally released by musical icons [Kev Carmody](#) and [Paul Kelly](#) back in 1993, and it remains a melody that most Aboriginal Australians know. This ‘anthem of hope’ was published as a beautiful picture book in 2008, with illustrations by kids from Gurindji country and paintings by Peter Hudson. This picture book is perfect for introducing significant Australian history into the classroom in an entertaining and accessible way.



The second title mentioned earlier is *Solid Rock* (Sacred Ground), first penned as lyrics by [Shane Howard](#) following an experience he had at Uluru in 1981. It was one of the first songs to hit the commercial airwaves that discussed the dispossession of Aboriginal people from their land and the truth behind first contact: invasion, warfare, and the consequences of colonisation for Aboriginal peoples.

Perhaps one of the more popular and wider reaching anthems is *My Island Home*, which was originally performed by the late George R. Burarrawanga, then front man for the Warumpi band from Papunya. Written by Victorian muso Neil Murray and first recorded back in 1987 on the band’s *Go Bush* album, it’s the story of George reminiscing about or rather missing his home on Elcho Island while living ‘west of Alice Springs’. But [Christine Anu](#) and the now disbanded girl-trio Tiddas have also recorded it. The song itself is something all Australians can relate to, living on the world’s largest island and the patriotism that can often be found when away from the ‘island home’.



Like the previous titles, young people vibrantly illustrate the work, this time from the communities of Papunya and Galiwinku, with paintings by [Peter Hudson](#).

Jeff McMullen, media veteran, human rights activist and Chair of the Ian Thorpe Fountain of Youth, wrote of this title:

The children from Galwinku, Elcho Island and Papunya see so clearly the stunning beauty of their homelands. Their book breathes the sense of each place, the striking blue of the sea and the warmth of burnt desert. Neil Murray’s song is a lyrical tribute to the contrasts and the eternal beauty of an island home we all love. (Back cover)

Finally, to top off the set of anthems, we have one that has become synonymous with the Reconciliation Movement, and that is Warumpi's *Black Fella White Fella*, also written by the talented Neil Murray for the NT band. As Olympian Ian Thorpe says:

This story challenges us all in asking if you are prepared to lend a hand to make a change, embrace each other's differences, speak out and stand strong together; then we can truly be true to ourselves. This is a powerful message to pass on to all our children. (Back cover)

Conclusion

In little over a decade of publishing, we have seen a massive growth in Indigenous children's literature that has drawn critical acclaim, while building new and broader audiences using the genre to educate as well as entertain. There are over twenty titles discussed here covering a few key areas, but a search on *BlackWords* on a range of other themes and issues will lead you to many other titles in the children's genre – which includes picture books, Dreaming stories, short stories, novels and poetry.

Notes

* As of 2019, this number has increased to 3,683.

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Banner 1. 'Nana's Land' - book cover. *Magabala Books*. [Source](#).

Banner 2. 'Papunya School book of Country and History' - book cover. *Allen and Unwin*. [Source](#).

Image Credits

Banner 3. 'When I was Little Like You' - book cover. *Allen and Unwin*. [Source](#).

Banner 4. 'Kim Scott'. *Pan Macmillan*. [Source](#).

Banner 5. 'Shake a Leg' - book cover. *Allen and Unwin*. [Source](#).

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